

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Learning from students: Factors that support student engagement in blended learning environments within and beyond classrooms

Leer by studente: Faktore wat studentebetrokkenheid in gemengde leeromgewings binne en buite klaskamers ondersteun

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ABSTRACT

Technology is key to making education systems more resilient to disruptions. In the South African higher education sector, technology will continue to play a much larger role than in the years preceding the COVID-19 pandemic. Technology, however, cannot replace the value gained through social contact and concerns about relational disengagement in curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular spaces have been noted. Drawing on large-scale qualitative data collected as part of the South African Survey of Student Engagement, this article explores what students consider as the most important factors in supporting their learning and development and how these factors might be translated to technologically enhanced learning and teaching spaces. Such insights from students' experiences could inform blended learning and teaching spaces that leverage technology to enhance relational engagement.

KEYWORDS

Blended learning, student engagement, relational engagement, COVID-19, South African Survey of Student Engagement, higher education

OPSOMMING

Tegnologie is die sleutel om onderwysstelsels meer bestand te maak teen ontwrigtings. In die Suid-Afrikaanse hoërondwyssektor sal tegnologie steeds 'n veel groter rol speel as tydens die jare wat die COVID-19-pandemie voorafgegaan het. Tegnologie kan egter nie die waarde vervang wat verkry word deur sosiale kontak nie en kommer oor verhoudingsonbetrokkenheid in kurrikulêre, ko-kurrikulêre en buite-kurrikulêre ruimtes is aangeteken. Met behulp van grootskaalse kwalitatiewe data wat as deel van die Suid-Afrikaanse Opname van Studentebetrokkenheid ingesamel is, ondersoek hierdie artikel dit wat studente die belangrikste faktore in die ondersteuning van hul leer en ontwikkeling beskou en hoe hierdie faktore omgesit kan word in tegnologie verbeterde leer- en onderrigruimtes. Sulke insigte uit studente se ervarings kan geïntegreerde leer- en onderrigruimtes met behulp van tegnologie gebruik om verhoudingsbetrokkenheid uit te bou.

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SLEUTELWOORDE

Gemengde leer, studentebetrokkenheid, verhoudingsbetrokkenheid, COVID 19, Suid-Afrikaanse Opname van Studentebetrokkenheid, hoëronderwys

Introduction

Longitudinal data from the South African Survey of Student Engagement (SASSE) show decreases in relational engagement indicators, such as student-staff interaction, collaborative learning, and quality of interactions when online learning was implemented in response to disruptions, such as the Fallist protests and the COVID-19 pandemic (Centre for Teaching and Learning, forthcoming). Relational engagement indicators, as identified here, refer to students' interactions with lecturers, particularly outside of formal classroom contexts, how they study with peers within and beyond classrooms, and how good they perceive relationships to be with other students, lecturers, and support staff. Challenges with relational engagement in online spaces, particularly in predominantly contact-based institutions (as opposed to institutions that provide distance or online education) are not unique to the South African context. Using the SASSE's parent survey, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), developed at Indiana University in the US, other studies have also found negative correlations between online learning and teaching contexts and relational engagement indicators (Dumford & Miller, 2018; Paulsen & McCormick, 2020). Concerns about relational engagement within and beyond the classroom have also been highlighted qualitatively by students and staff in national surveys conducted during 2020 and 2021, respectively, in the South African higher education context (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2021; Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2020). It is therefore important to find ways of enhancing relational engagements between students, their peers, and staff as contact institutions move towards more blended learning and teaching contexts. For this, we explore student engagement as a conceptual framework in contact and online or distance contexts and use elements of student engagement to learn from students' experiences which factors matter in enhancing relational engagement.

Student engagement

The concept and measurement of student engagement has been central to understanding student experiences in higher education. Kuh (2001) describes student engagement as the extent to which students participate in educationally purposeful behaviours, and the extent to which institutions create an environment that enables students' participation in such behaviours. Educationally purposeful activities refer to behaviours that have been identified through research as being valuable contributors to learning and, ultimately, student success. Strydom and Loots (2020) summarise examples of such behaviours as the amount of time spent on learning tasks (Carroll, 1963), the quality of students' effort (Pace, 1984), behaviours underpinned by the principles for good practice in undergraduate education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987), students' active participation in their studies (Astin, 1977), and behaviours that contribute to student

success as outlined by the meta-analyses of factors contributing to student success by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005).

Other conceptualisations of student engagement have developed over the years – all recognising the interplay between students and institutions in promoting student engagement. Trowler (2010), for example, positions student engagement as the interaction between time, effort, and resources, aiming to both optimise the student experience and the performance of the institution, while Barkley (2010) argues for student engagement as the pedagogical result of interaction between motivation and active learning.

Student engagement, as measured in South Africa through the SASSE surveys, can be categorised into four themes, or areas of engagement, within which relational engagement indicators are spread out. The four themes include (i) academic challenge (purposeful learning behaviours taking place within the curriculum), (ii) learning with peers (purposeful learning behaviours with peers within or outside of the curriculum), (iii) experience with staff (relational engagement with lecturers and pedagogy), and (iv) campus environment (including perceptions of support, well-being, engagements in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, and quality of interactions) (Strydom & Foxcroft, 2017). Two of the four themes are about pedagogical engagement – with a particular emphasis on the relationship between students, knowledge, and lecturers. This is based on the premise that purposeful learning behaviours take place within the pedagogical relationship and consist of various forms of deep learning, such as higher-order learning or reflective and integrative learning, which require more than the memorisation of information (Kuh et al., 2010).

Lecturers who emphasise reflective and integrative learning motivate students to make connections between module content and various real-world examples by emphasising an examination of one's own beliefs, and others' perspectives and viewpoints, leading them to engage in deeper learning that enriches their understanding of module content (Huber & Hutchings, 2004; Laird et al., 2005). Facilitating a relationship with deep learning can only take place through good teaching and learning practices (Ambrose et al., 2010). Effective teaching practices promote student learning and skills and might include setting clear explanations, presenting work in an organised way, providing students with relatable examples, and providing students with timeous feedback to guide their learning. Another aspect of pedagogical engagement is students' relationships with lecturers. Students learn firsthand how experts think about and solve problems by interacting with staff members inside and outside of instructional settings (Kuh et al., 2010). As a result, staff become role models, mentors, and guides for lifelong learning. Students who have regular contact with lecturers and support staff are positively influenced by increasing students' cognitive growth, engagement, development and academic success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Lecturers are often required to move between the roles of teacher, researcher, mentor, and advisor, making them key role players in students' educational journeys.

Another theme centres learning with peers. Purposeful learning behaviours with peers within or outside of the curriculum is an important contributor to mastering

difficult material and developing interpersonal and social competence (Kuh, 2007). During the COVID-19 pandemic, students reported engaging significantly less with peers than before the pandemic (DHET, 2020). Studies on peer learning, however, seem to suggest that smaller class settings of tutorials or discussions, even when virtual, may promote better engagement through a strong discussion leader who is able to engage students to participate by using different techniques (Hollister et al., 2022). Another aspect of learning with peers is the value engagement with diverse others bring to students' academic and personal development, including preparing students to work in diverse environments (Crutcher et al., 2007).

Lastly, student engagement is about how students experience the campus environment in terms of their perceptions of support, whether they feel the institution cares about their well-being, student engagements in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, and the quality of interactions they experience. Students benefit from and are more satisfied by supportive campus environments that cultivate positive relationships among students, lecturers, and staff (Kuh et al., 2010). The campus environment further influences students' relationships with peers, lecturers, and support and administrative staff. Institutions that are dedicated to enhancing student success should therefore focus on developing the campus environment in such a way to provide support to students across a variety of areas that include the cognitive, social and physical, within and beyond the classroom (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Aspects of campus environment that have been found to contribute to students' engagement, academic achievement, personal growth, social engagement, and a sense of belonging, include (i) academic resources and facilities, such as libraries, laboratories, equipment, and other infrastructure and resources, such as access to internet, as well as academic support services (Kuh et al., 2008); (ii) co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, such as student organisations, sport, and leadership opportunities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005); (iii) opportunities for social engagement, including opportunities for cultural exchange, which contributes to the development of social skills, empathy, and global citizenship (Tinto, 1998); and (iv) creating a sense of belonging and care by helping students and staff feel part of a common community that cares for each other's well-being (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kuh et al., 2008).

Student engagement has played a significant role in how the sector understands the changes in student populations in recent years (Mentz, 2012; Strydom et al., 2017; Universities South Africa [USAf], 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). Student engagement has also contributed to predicting student success (Schreiber & Yu, 2016); identifying institutional responsibilities in promoting engagement (Ivala & Kioko, 2013); and identifying what effective educational behaviours contribute to student success, such as tutorial programmes (University of the Free State [UFS], 2019) and academic advising (UFS, 2018). Student engagement work further advocates for implementing scaled initiatives or high-impact practices (HIPs), such as variations of peer learning or first-year experience initiatives to make a significant impact in the learning experiences of as many students as possible (Loots et al., 2017). Within classrooms, Kinzie et al. (2017) have replicated international studies in the South African context to identify which

pedagogical behaviours are most effective in stimulating students' engagement and success. They found that, among others, relational engagement behaviours, such as asking questions, contributing to discussions, having discussions with lecturers, asking other students for help, or offering help to others, and engaging in group work, have a positive impact on students' academic performance.

While findings illustrating the link between student engagement and success are invaluable in informing development initiatives, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the trajectory of how learning and teaching evolves in contact institutions, particularly when the reliance of such institutions on technology will only increase to promote resilience to such large-scale disruptions. While we are navigating this evolution, there have been several studies on student engagement in online or distance education that we can learn from.

Student engagement in online or distance education

On discussing student engagement in online contexts, Kennedy (2020) draws on the work of Moore (1989), among others, to provide a helpful differentiation between an interaction perspective, an interactivity perspective, and a learning design perspective. An interaction perspective positions interactions (learner-instructor, learner-learner, and learner-content) as central to developing student engagement. Considerations for all three types of interactions are important in online learning and teaching contexts and the importance of all three types of interaction has been confirmed in other contexts. For example, in an Indonesian context, Muzammil et al. (2020) found that interactions among students, between students and instructors, and interactions between students and content resulted in increased levels of student engagement. In contrast to the interaction perspective, the interactivity perspective is built on the premise that interacting with technology makes learning more engaging. Behavioural engagement and cognitive engagement stand out. Behavioural engagement is measured by counting clicks, mapping navigation, and so forth. In e-learning, student engagement is often restricted to observable behaviours, such as the number of student responses to lecturers' questions, or the number of students who participated in a class activity (Adams et al., 2021). Cognitive engagement, on the other hand, is measured by students' engagement with the learning material at a deeper level, such as implementing a learning taxonomy, or levels of learning, to guide deeper learning progression.

In terms of a learning design perspective of student engagement, Kennedy (2020, p. 3) states that the "way in which teachers design and develop online learning environments for students is – implicitly or explicitly – based on an underlying understanding, theory or framework of how they think students learn". Such underlying understanding informs the design favoured by teachers or lecturers, which might include a preference for problem-based learning, simulation-based learning models, or peer-based learning models.

Another perspective is engagement theory, which Kearsley and Shneiderman (1998) positioned as a framework for technology-based teaching and learning. Kearsley and Shneiderman's work is based on the premise that students must be meaningfully

engaged in learning activities through interaction with others and worthwhile tasks – the latter of which could be translated into learning activities that are collaborative, project-based, and have an outside or authentic focus.

Importantly, at the core of these perspectives to enhance student engagement is not the technology used, but the understanding of learning and how technology can be used to leverage learning in the specific subject context.

Having explored the concept of student engagement in contact and distance or online learning, we now turn to students' experiences of engagement.

Methodology

The SASSE was adapted to the South African context from the NSSE and first administered in 2007. Since then, the SASSE has been administered annually and at almost all public higher education institutions. The SASSE measures ten student engagement indicators, grouped into the four themes noted earlier, and, until 2021, it had focused only on collecting quantitative data, as the main purpose of the SASSE is to provide institutions with a high-level overview of students' engagement that can stimulate self-reflection and benchmarking to identify areas where interventions are necessary. In 2021, the SASSE team, guided by the example of the NSSE team in the US, included one qualitative question to the SASSE administration to explore the value a qualitative question might add to the quantitative survey. The 2021 administration of the SASSE included ten institutions and a sample of 14,175 undergraduate students who answered the following qualitative question: *What has been the most important factor contributing to your learning and development at this institution, and why?*

The data were analysed through the lens of the the student engagement themes identified earlier, namely pedagogical enhancement, learning with peers, and how students experience the campus environment. For example, if students mentioned learning or lecturers as being the most important factor contributing to their learning and development, this was first coded under the pedagogical enhancement theme. Subsequent coding would then explore the details of what students consider to have been contributing to their learning and development in this context, and how these factors might be translated into enhancing relational engagement in technologically enhanced learning and teaching spaces. This method of analysis was repeated for the student engagement themes to provide insight into the factors students felt most contributed to their learning and development and whether these factors could remain similar in a more blended learning environment. Students' responses related to each student engagement theme are shared next.

Student responses

Pedagogical engagement: The relationship between students, knowledge, and lecturers

Lecturers are a key contact point between students and the institution. Thus, the relationship between lecturers and their students are important to nurture. Several

students commented that lecturers played a central role in their learning and development. Two aspects about lecturers were highlighted: having caring relationships with lecturers and the importance of having lecturers who engage in good teaching practices. Caring relationships in this context refer to students feeling supported and understood by lecturers, being motivated by lecturers, experiencing a sense of generosity and helpfulness from lecturers, and easily communicating with lecturers. Some of the students' comments regarding the relationship with their lecturers are shared here:

The support and understanding of lecturers. Their willingness to help.

Motivation from lecturers. Most of my lecturers are always motivating us to study hard.

Having awesome lecturers that are not afraid to share information.

The ease of communication with the lectures has been helpful in dealing with challenges.

In terms of good teaching practices, students appreciated how lecturers help them to understand content by breaking it up into more digestible pieces, how lecturers kept them engaged, and provided them with constructive feedback. Some examples of how students referred to good teaching practices as important contributors to their learning and development include:

The manner in which my lectures teach me – they are able to make me understand the content fully.

Lecturers have kept me engaged with the content and made it more digestible.

Feedback from lecturers. It serves as a reminder to put in more effort and is motivating.

None of the factors that students appreciated most from lecturers in terms of their relationships with them as well as good teaching practices, are bound to face-to-face encounters. Showing a sense of care, motivating students, and communicating well can take place in many forms and through varying channels. Similarly, innovative ways of using technology to provide feedback to students or implement good teaching practices are well documented in distance education literature (e.g., Jaekel et al., 2023; Nsiah, 2013; Singaram et al., 2022).

Beyond good teaching and learning practices, another aspect of students' relationship with knowledge is whether they perceive their education as being of good quality. Students' perceptions of quality come in different forms. For example, the examples shown here all have to do with how students perceive quality. The quote below is about having well researched and documented content, where students are able to see the relevance of what they are learning.

I would say that the curriculum for each module have been thoroughly researched. It has also been very well organised and well-documented in the study guides.

Recognising the importance of a well-constructed curriculum is important, especially considering that anyone can access a range of knowledge about any topics via the internet, YouTube, open-access publications, and even open-access MOOCs. Presenting a curriculum that contains relevant and well-structured knowledge, is therefore an important contribution to quality. Good, organised teaching practices also confirm Kuh and colleagues' (2010) positioning of effective teaching practices as indicators of student engagement. The second quote is about institutional reputation. This student commented on the prominence of the university and its lecturers as an aspect of quality:

This institution is ranked one of the best in South Africa. It has prominent lecturers who will go above and beyond to help you pass your modules. I must say I've gained a lot of knowledge from my course, and I'm privileged because of the learning experiences.

Lastly, quality also took the form of deep learning. In this case the student refers to being able to apply theoretical concepts:

Being able to apply the concepts in the real world, and to be able to optimise businesses and make them efficient using software and mathematics.

References such as this one about being able to apply concepts in the real world relate directly to higher-order and reflective and integrative learning, or deep learning, which Kuh et al. (2010) argue is central to academic engagement. Well-designed online or blended learning assessments can ensure that students are able to apply theoretical concepts in practice.

Learning with peers

The following quotes from students are examples of how they see the role of peers in their learning and development:

The support from other students. Having people around that feel the same way and had to deal with the same stressful situations and load of work gives me comfort. It's good to know I'm not alone.

Learning within a group helped me a lot, we always pushed each other and supported each other.

Helping me evaluate my performance and engagement with peers during learning.

The tutors make it easy for us to know what is required from us; they are able to relate to where we are struggling.

I learned to work with other students' beliefs and opinions that are different from mine; the importance of respecting their religion and understanding that everyone is unique.

Peers enable a sense of kinship or belonging for students and are important contributors to learning. The first two quotes above illustrate this kinship – when students feel they are receiving support from other students, they feel less alone in their struggles. The last quotes illustrate how peers contribute to each other's learning by motivating each

other, evaluating performances, relating better to peers than to lecturers, and reflecting on their own opinions in relation to diverse others' opinions. Such findings support that of Kuh (2007), and Crutcher et al. (2007) noted earlier on the importance of peers in mastering difficult materials and contributing to the development of interpersonal and social competence, as well as what students gain through interactions with diverse others. The latter forms part of reflective and integrative learning, which is a key indicator of the SASSE. As noted earlier, students indicated that they did not engage much with their peers formally during the pandemic, resulting in much less peer learning taking place (DHET, 2020). However, as we move towards integrating more technology in learning and teaching spaces, it will be important to focus on how peer learning can be optimised through technology.

Campus environment

The last engagement theme focuses on students' relationships with the institution through the campus environment. From students' perspectives, having access to the following support structures or initiatives has a big impact on their learning and development: academic advising, infrastructure and resources, counselling, funding, co- or extra-curricular activities, and personal motivation and drive. Each will be discussed briefly.

Academic advising

The three quotes below each represent the different ways in which academic advising helps students. The first quote is about teaching students skills, which might include time management or planning as this student said. But it can also include study skills, goal setting, and other important skills to help students cope with the demands of their studies. The second quote is about helping students navigate the system, such as making the right subject choices or in this student's case, helping them understand how appeals work. The last quote illustrates that advising can help students develop personally – to tap into their strengths and reflect on who they are and where they want to be.

Advice from academic advisors has been of huge benefit with regards to planning my learning and developing time management skills. This has helped me deal with the heavy workload I get from school.

The academic advisor. He has been so supportive, he helped me so much to appeal and continue with my studies.

Academic advising taught me a lot in terms of my academics, it made me discover my true passion and all the necessary strategies I need to use in order to achieve the goals I set for myself.

Infrastructure and resources

Access to infrastructure and resources has been a hot topic since 2020 but has been long been argued as a contributor to students' engagement (e.g. Kuh et al., 2008). Having

access to appropriate devices, network, data, and the necessary digital skills to make optimal use of technology are vital components in supporting student success. For the students whose quotes we use as examples here, having access to a quiet study space in the library, being able to access resources on campus, having stable internet access, and learning how to use a computer, have been listed as the factors that made the most impact on their learning and development at the institution.

The fact that I stay on campus. I do not have a laptop or smartphone. I also do not have money to travel to campus every day to make use of the facilities. Staying on campus also means I can get help from students studying the same course.

Having access to the internet. It has been the most important factor because all my modules give out assignments that require thorough research.

Being able to learn how to use a computer – it helped to make things easier academically.

Accessibility to the library and lecture halls after learning hours. This is because most residences have a lot of noise, so I use the lecture hall to study [with a computer].

Access to counselling services

Several students commented on how being able to access mental health services through the university helped them in different ways. In the first quote below, the student shares how they received support when their grandfather passed away, which also helped them cope better with other difficulties they encountered in subsequent years. The second quote shows how mental health support does not have to be limited to one-on-one personalized support, but that group sessions on how to cope or in this student's case, understanding varsity better, can be used to reach more students.

In my first year when my grandfather passed away. It was so difficult for me to cope. I attended a few sessions of counselling and ever since I have been better able to cope every year whenever I have encountered difficulties.

Our institution offers counselling for students with personal issues, we are at times invited to attend programmes that makes us understand varsity better, how it differs from high school and most importantly how we should deal with this whole new experience (as I am a first-year student).

Co- and extra-curricular activities

Students gave many examples of co- or extra-curricular activities that have had a significant influence on their learning and development, some of which are shared in the quotes below. The important take-away from these examples is that learning and development extend beyond the classroom.

My internship, I've gained a lot of practical knowledge which has made me look at the course in a broader way and understand how things work in a much more practical way.

HIV/AIDS Peer Education program has enriched me in terms of personal development, facilitation and leadership skills. It has taught me not to tolerate discrimination and embrace the concept of diversity and inclusivity for everyone.

The institution also provides debate societies that help sharpen the mind. They provided moot courts as well to help law students prepare for litigation procedures.

My involvement in student organisations and leadership taught me many skills that I am grateful for and has been a large contributor in meeting people from different backgrounds.

The extracurricular activities, like sport, because in sport you learn the value of teamwork.

Financial support

Many students commented that having financial support was the most important factor in their learning and development – mainly because it enabled them to participate in education by paying tuition and other fees, but it also enabled them to purchase laptops and data. Merit bursaries are also motivation for students to study hard, and holistic bursaries from foundations or other providers often supply additional support, such as advising and even psychological support to students. An important non-monetary contribution that funding makes is illustrated in the last quote – putting at least some of the anxiety over their futures to rest for the time being. Some quotes from students include:

NSFAS For paying fees, accommodation and allowance, if it was not for it, I would not be here.

The fact that there is a merit bursary for 75% average also motivates me daily, and that was one of the main reasons why I chose to study here.

The most important factor has been my bursary, as they support me in everything but most of all is that they support me financially.

Having a bursary to pay out all expenses. Not having the stress to ask other people for money and having the calmness to know that I will have a job after my studies.

Personal and social factors

There are several personal and social factors that students consider as having had the most impact on their learning and development. Some of which include being passionate about what they are studying, being disciplined towards reaching their goals, realizing the importance of self-care, and relying on religious beliefs to support them through their studies. A significant number of students also commented that their family, their socio-economic background, or the communities they come from are the main contributors to their learning and development. The quotes shared here illustrate some of this focus:

My family. I want to make my family proud of me since [I] am the first one to be on varsity.

I'm motivated by my background and the type of institution I'm in. I come from a very poor background with no graduates and I was the lucky one who was blessed to go [to] tertiary, when I go home I can see it in everyone's faces that they are proud of me; I can't let them down, and I can't let myself down either.

Besides physically participating in sport, the sub-themes that contribute to a supportive campus environment highlighted here – academic advising, access to infrastructure and resources, counselling services, co- and extra-curricular activities, leveraging financial support, and acknowledging personal and social factors influencing students – are not bound to face-to-face encounters. Equipping students and staff with necessary access to technological infrastructure and resources, supporting the development of digital skills and competencies, and creating well designed support structures can enable support departments to reach more students through technology. For example, hosting mental health webinars, or facilitating online workshops on study skills can reach significantly more students than face-to-face consultations.

Discussion

The student data confirm the importance of pedagogical relationships between students and lecturers, students and peers, students and content, but also relationships between students and the broader institution. A valuable contribution to the interactive perspective (Moore, 1989) is that student learning and development are not bound to pedagogical relationships, but extend to relationships with support and administrative staff, and peers beyond the physical or virtual classroom.

Regarding relationships with lecturers and content, what stands out for students is a sense of care, good teaching practices, and receiving quality education, while relationships with peers are key to nurturing a sense of belonging and deeper engagement with content. Having access to academic and non-academic support, technology and infrastructure, and access to platforms where students can develop personally and socially are key factors that determine the quality of students' relationship with the institution as a whole.

Another indirect contribution to an interactive perspective on student engagement is the emphasis students placed on the personal and social factors that motivate and drive them to pursue further education. If we do not understand how students' backgrounds or current circumstances influence their behaviours, we are unlikely to build rapport with them and develop caring relationships.

A limitation of this study is the inability to include the majority of student voices because of the size of the dataset. Qualitative studies are typically not this big, and the presentation of data is limited to student voices representing broad themes. On the other hand, inclusion of the themes noted in this article acknowledges that many students identified these factors as significant contributors to their learning and development, thereby lending credibility to the student voices.

Ultimately, what students' reflections have shown is that technology is just a platform and that the real value behind relational engagement lies with the people that make an effort to care and support students on their educational journeys. Neither engagement literature, nor the students' experiences shared in this article regard technology as an inhibitor of engagement if there is a clear understanding of what the needs of students are, how learning works, and how to best translate these understandings into online spaces. It is the responsibility of institutions to become knowledgeable about who their students are, and how to best create blended environments that support learning and development – within and beyond the classroom.

Conclusion

This study explored what students note as the most important factors supporting their learning and development at university and how these factors might be translated into enhancing relational engagement in technologically enhanced learning and teaching spaces. We analysed the data through a student engagement lens, with a particular focus on how engagement manifests in pedagogical relationships, peer relationships and relationships beyond the classroom.

The emergency remote learning and teaching response during the COVID-19 pandemic provided South African higher education institutions with a glimpse of the benefits and challenges a more technologically enhanced sector might hold (e.g. CHE, 2021; DHET, 2020). Concerns about relational engagement during this time sparked conversations about whether technology could widen gaps between students and their lecturers, students and their peers, and even students and the content they should engage with. By bringing in students' relationship experiences and drawing on literature guiding engagement in online learning and teaching contexts, we are not necessarily concerned. Relationships will remain central to engagement, regardless of the learning platform, and with appropriate learning design, these relationships could be enhanced with technology. Learning from students in this way also contributes to how we should think about leveraging technology in the areas that matter to students as a means to enhance curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular student engagement, while paying particular attention to how relationships can be strengthened in a more technologically advanced sector. More research on relational engagement, particularly in the South African context, would be helpful to find ways of leveraging technology without disadvantaging students who might not have access to infrastructure, resources, or the skills and competencies to fully access blended learning environments.

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Ethics statement

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Potential conflict of interest

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